
FALL 2013
VOLUME 24 ISSUE 1

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AMBS window

IMPROVISING LEADERSHIP

David Miller, Associate Professor of Missional Leadership Development

When I began serving as a pastor in the early 1980s, a wide array of seminars and workshops focused on strategic planning for congregations and pastors. All that was needed, these resources told us, were a clear mission statement and defined, measurable goals for the church. Pastors were to function as CEOs to chart the way toward a successful future.

However, these corporate planning models, geared around notions of success, growth and dominance, have largely come up short in the face of changing communities, declining attendance, diminished social power and prestige of Christian congregations, and greater skepticism about the trustworthiness of Christian proclamation.

Over time, I discovered I was drawing increasingly on lessons from



my earlier education as an actor and experience in improvisation. As actors, we were schooled in the canons of theater—plot, character development, stagecraft. These traditions were then released in the unanticipated challenges of improvisational situations. Tradition became living and dynamic—not mere repetition, but new embodiment. Actors who scarcely knew each other could create together in the face of new twists, conflicts, possibilities and limitations.

As the church finds itself in an increasingly changed and challenged social location, leadership requires the skills and soul of a jazz musician or improvisational actor. Well grounded in the canons of scripture and tradition, leaders seek to shape and release congregational imagination toward new improvisations of the tradition.

The past is not the object of defense and preservation, but the foundation of creative and creating hope that seeks to embody the 'what if' of God's vision. What if Isaiah was right that the Word of God is accomplishing God's purpose

in the world (Isaiah 55:10-11)? What if Christ's Spirit is continuing to yearn that the world may know "the things that make for peace"? What if our congregations seek not to have all the answers, but instead—as communities of memory, anticipation and improvisation—live into experiments in God's reconciliation and peace?

In such a move we are more recipients and learners than managers of God's gracious work. We learn anew that truth that transforms is found more in participation than in rational defense.

In these pages, you will read of leaders and congregations engaging in improvisational ventures resulting in racial reconciliation, justice for immigrants, compassion and care for children and youth, healing and welcome for a former convict—the ancient vision of God's shalom embodied anew on contemporary stages. ●

Photo: The Nueva Vida Norristown New Life congregation celebrated its 23rd anniversary in July when this photo was taken. See more on page 2.
Photo by Peder Wiegner.

BRIDGING CHURCH AND COMMUNITY



During September, Hyde Park Mennonite Fellowship of Boise, Idaho, took part in eleven days of prayer and fasting for immigration reform—eleven days to symbolize the estimated eleven million undocumented people currently living in our country.

After the Mennonite Church USA convention in Phoenix with its emphasis on immigration, our congregation had a worship series on immigration and the Bible, which led to a letter-writing campaign, which eventually led us into joining with some other Idaho congregations in this fasting and prayer effort (including two other Mennonite congregations).

As a congregation we are seeking to be a prophetic voice in our community. We know this means speaking from who we are as a peculiar people of faith—a

people who seek to point to the God that created all people in God's very own image with limitless potential. We also know this means we must pay attention for where God is already at work within our community. Participating in this time of prayer and fasting was, for us, a clear place of intersection of those two elements: who we are as a community of faith, and where God was already at work in our community.

Marc Schlegel is pastor of Hyde Park Mennonite Fellowship. He completed an AMBS Master of Divinity degree in 2012.

Photo: Marc Schlegel speaks at an immigration reform rally on the steps of the Idaho state capitol to kick off "11 days of prayer and fasting for immigration reform." Behind him are photos of "Aspiring Americans" who are the face of this movement.

Nueva Vida Norristown New Life (NVNNL) launched an extensive mission, Enlarging Our Place in God's World, in 2008. The vision is built on the intercultural congregation's call from God to share the reconciling and transforming love of Jesus with the people of Norristown and beyond.

The mission includes sharing space with a childcare ministry for low income families, bridging the digital divide at the New Life Internet café, photo ID clinics, youth outreach, prayer walks, street evangelism, a discipleship housing ministry for single women, outdoor worship services, preparation of social safety net applications, translation services, and backyard peace camps for community children. Some members also minister at a thrift store, soup kitchen and homeless shelter.

The long-range plan is to form ACTS 2 Ministries as a community development corporation. Anticipated ministries include counseling services, restorative justice peace circles and restarting a microenterprise training program for the city and county.

The congregation represents 17 cultures/ethnicities. Everyone, even children and youth, can find ways to participate in God's vision for the congregation. The mission grows through much prayer, discernment, sacrificial giving and support from Franconia Conference and other partners.

Sharon Gehman Williams (Master of Divinity 1986) serves as minister of worship at NVNNL.

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3003 Benham Avenue
Elkhart IN, 46517
574.295.3726
advancement@ambs.edu

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A seminary of
Mennonite Church USA and
Mennonite Church Canada

ALUMNI NEWS

Several graduates have accepted positions at Oaklawn, a Mennonite psychiatric hospital and mental health center:

- **Andrea Opel (Master of Divinity 2012)**, social worker with Elkhart County Child and Adolescent Clinical Services.
- **Rolando Sosa Granados (Master of Divinity 2010)**, social worker with child and adolescent clinical services.
- **Joseph Vallejos (Master of Arts: Peace Studies 2010)**, social worker with addictions services.

Jake Hess (Master of Arts: Peace Studies 2013) is serving as co-

ordinator and caseworker in the Community Service Restitution Program with the Center for Community Justice in Elkhart.

Sandy Miller (Master of Divinity 2012) was ordained Aug. 18 at Silverwood Mennonite Church, Goshen, for her ministry as director for church relations at Mennonite Mission Network.

Sherri Martin-Carman (Master of Divinity 1998) was ordained Oct. 27 at the Floradale Mennonite Church in Ontario for her ministry as a retirement home chaplain. ●



soul. The transformative experiences of this internship convince me that, whatever the context of my future ministry, I must seek out cross-cultural and interchurch partnerships with ministers like Rev. Tinsley who can teach me how to be a midwife of hope and justice in the church and community.

Julia Gingrich is a Master of Divinity student. She lives in Elkhart and attends Prairie Street Mennonite Church.

Photo at left: Julia Gingrich (right) pictured with Rev. Jennifer Tinsley at St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church, Elkhart.

In January, I felt the Spirit nudging me to pursue a pastoral internship at St. James AME (African Methodist Episcopal) as I listened to Rev. Jennifer Tinsley preach at a Dr. King Day service. Rev. Tinsley raised a prophetic cry against the structures of death, such as mass incarceration and gun violence, which are devastating the black community in Elkhart.

Several weeks into my internship, the powers of death struck the black community in Elkhart when a 16-year-old was killed in a drive-by shooting. The acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin stirred up more “groans too deep for words.”

My summer internship allowed me to enter spaces where I was graciously invited to listen to the Spirit groaning through the urgent prayers voiced by members of Christ’s body who are awaiting liberation from racial oppression. As a result, my own longing for a racially just world deepened, and I was compelled to attend to the ways my privilege and collusion with oppressive systems harm others and wound my own

Mike was a lifer in Saskatchewan Penitentiary in Prince Albert when he signed up for Person-to-Person, a prison visitation program started in 1974 by the Conference of Mennonites of Saskatchewan where visitors come once a month to listen to, talk with and become friends with those in prison.



In the first visits, Mike entered the room with his hat over eyes, mumbled for a bit and that was it. Over time the hat slowly began to rise and the mumbles turned into discussion. He even shared his dream to one day own a house, grow

a large garden and have a pet cat.

After Mike was released on parole, he joined our CoSA program (Circles of Support and Accountability for offenders most likely to re-offend). After several years, he bought a small house, tilled the entire back yard and adopted Misty from the local pet shelter.

Three years later, Mike died suddenly from a heart attack as he was preparing for worship at Grace Mennonite Church, the congregation where he was baptized and a member. For the funeral, the congregation filled up with ex-inmates, prison guards, parole officers, coworkers, other CoSA members, volunteers, friends and the congregation.

That evening, and through Mike’s redeemed life, we were touched by the Kingdom of God.

Ryan Siemens, Master of Divinity 2007, is pastor of Grace Mennonite Church, Prince Albert, Sask. He will continue this ministry part-time after January when he also becomes director of the Person-to-Person program. ●

Photo at left: Mike was a member of the Grace Mennonite congregation, Prince Albert, Sask. This photo was taken a month before his death, the only time he ever wore a tuxedo.

YOUR GIFTS AT WORK

AMBS’s Intercultural Competency and Undoing Racism committee leads the seminary toward our vision of making “theological education accessible to and welcoming of Christians of increasingly diverse traditions, ethnicities and races.”

Your gifts support this vital mission not only as the seminary works toward this vision, but also as we prepare leaders to minister in increasingly diverse contexts.

All employees recently participated in the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), assessing our capacity to accurately understand and adapt behavior to cultural difference and commonality. Iris deLeón-Hartshorn of Mennonite Church USA and local IDI administrator Darin Short are working with us to help us grow toward greater intercultural competence. Committee members are (back) Safwat Marzouk, Jewel Gingerich Longenecker, Zach Kovitch; (middle) Loren Johns, Nekeisha Alexis-Baker; (front) Bob Rosa and Katerina Friesen. ●



PANORAMA

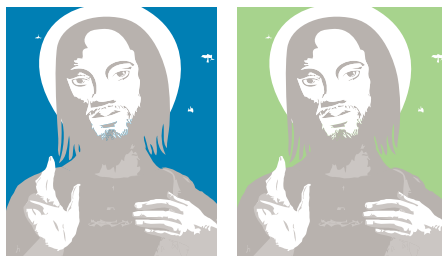
President reappointed

Sara Wenger Shenk, AMBS president, has been reappointed for another four-year term, 2014–18. This action began with the AMBS board of directors and included actions from Mennonite Church Canada Christian Formation Council and Mennonite Education Agency of Mennonite Church USA.

Bruce Baergen, chair of the AMBS board, said, “After completing a very comprehensive review of Sara’s first term we want to celebrate the outstanding work and commitment she has given to and continues to give to the seminary.”

Anabaptist Short Courses

Six-week online courses on congregational conflict and Mennonite polity are scheduled for spring. In addition, a Spanish-language course on Anabaptist history and theology—also six-weeks online—is offered in February and March. Visit www.ambs.edu/anabaptistshortcourses



Pastors Week features 5 faculty

“Help me see Jesus! Help me see, Jesus!” is the theme of **Pastors Week, Jan. 27–30**. Five AMBS professors will focus on Jesus from different points of view:

- Rachel Miller Jacobs, D.Min.;
- Andy Brubacher Kaethler, Ph.D.;
- Safwat Marzouk, Ph.D.;
- Jamie Pitts, Ph.D.;
- Allan Rudy Froese, Ph.D.

Cyneatha Millsaps and Janeen Bertsche Johnson will lead worship times. Information about workshops, teaching sessions, affinity group gatherings and more is available: www.ambs.edu/pastorsweek

Leadership Clinics

Daylong workshops are scheduled for January 27:

- How dare we call ourselves Anabaptist?
- Sex offenders in my church?
- Gathering for new pastors

Spring online course

Social Theory for Christian

Peacemakers will be taught online during spring semester. Instructor Gerald Shenk hopes students from many different settings will bring life experience into conversation with the theological convictions and social theory constructs. www.ambs.edu/academics/social-theory-for-Christian-peacemakers-course.cfm

Upcoming events

- Workshop: Lent Planner, Jan. 17
- Webinar: Lent Planning, Feb. 11
- Webinar: Jubilee for Today, March 6
- Webinar: What is your Sermon Doing?, March 20

www.ambs.edu/churchleadershipcenter/index.cfm

PRESIDENT'S WINDOW SARA WENGER SHENK



Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved (Acts 2:46–47).

What a remarkable story. Even a revolutionary story. The birth day of the church. A story and Spirit that keep inspiring us to try radical new church ventures.

And yet we live with this reality: the fastest growing religious preference for adults in the United States and Canada is “no religious preference” and the number of religiously unaffiliated persons has hit an all-time high.

I love the way a non-anxious *Washington Post* columnist describes our time:

“It’s a yeasty time. Christianity is being reinvented. My guess is that it will get smaller for a while. Many churches built in the religious boom years of the past century will close. There will be tensions between experimenters and traditionalists. Denominational loyalty will continue to fade. But fresh ways of blending the old and the new will continue to emerge. And, yet again, an ancient protean faith will find new forms.”

It was a yeasty time when there was a sound like a rushing wind and all were filled with the Holy Spirit. Foreigners heard stories about God’s marvelous deeds in their own languages. People

disagreed about what was happening. Some were amazed. Some perplexed. Others simply sneered.

Peter steps up, as good leaders do, to show how all of God’s saving action in the world climaxed in Jesus Christ. It suddenly dawned on people that they’d gotten Jesus all wrong! They were “cut to the heart” saying, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

“Repent, and be baptized ... in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” The church was born!

AMBS is a “yeasty” community. We devote ourselves to the apostles’ teaching, to fellowship, to breaking bread and the prayers—finding fresh ways daily to blend the old and the new. Thanks be to God for our graduates who step up, as good leaders do, to show the way in Norristown, Boise, Prince Albert, Elkhart and beyond. ●